

## SCREENING FORM FOR LOW-EFFECT HCP DETERMINATIONS

### I. Project Information

#### A. Project name:

Post Ranch Inn

#### B. Affected species:

Smiths blue butterfly (*Euphilotes enoptes smithi*) (federally endangered) and California red-legged frog (*Rana aurora draytonii*) (federally threatened)

#### C. Project size (in acres):

Total project area is 91.98 acres. Construction (including temporary staging areas and fire clearance areas) would occur on 5.136 acres of the total project area.

#### D. Brief project description including minimization and mitigation plans:

The applicant proposes to expand an existing inn, including construction of 10 new guest units, a mercantile and gallery building, a group of spa and exercise buildings, a central services building, a group of employee housing buildings, a maintenance building, a picnic area, and associated roads, parking areas, and wastewater treatment facilities. Much of the construction would occur in areas that are already developed or landscaped. Operations will include fire and vegetation management and guest use of the inn.

The applicant proposes to fund and implement mitigation and minimization measures that will include: replacement of impacted seacliff buckwheat (*Erigonum parvifolium*) plants (a host plant of the Smith's blue butterfly); removal of invasive plants and revegetation with native plants; removal of non-native bullfrogs (*Rana catesbeiana*), mosquitofish (*Gambusia affinis*), and crayfish (*Pacifastacus* spp.) from a California red-legged frog breeding pond; restoration of riparian habitat adjacent to a California red-legged frog breeding pond; temporary fencing to avoid damage to habitat adjacent to construction areas; a biological monitor to oversee construction; an education program for employees and guests of the inn; a shuttle system to reduce traffic near a California red-legged frog breeding pond; and perpetual protection of 36.1 acres of habitat via a conservation easement.

**II. Does the HCP fit the low-effect criteria in the HCP Handbook?** *The answer must be "yes" to all three questions below for a positive determination. Each response should include an explanation.*

**A. Are the effects of the HCP minor or negligible on federally listed, proposed, or candidate species and their habitats covered under the HCP prior to implementation of the mitigation plan? (Handbook pg. 1-8 and 1-9)**

Yes, the effects are minor or negligible.

Smith's blue butterflies are known to occur within the Project Area. Their abundance in the Project Area is unknown, but the amount of habitat available to them there has been estimated as 2000 total seacliff buckwheat plants. A 0.003-acre area that could provide Smith's blue butterfly habitat would be developed. Up to 15 seacliff buckwheat plants would be removed due to construction activities. Up to 10 additional seacliff buckwheat plants would be removed due to habitat and fire management activities per year, but with a total limit of 100 plants removed due to these activities over the proposed 20-year permit term. Therefore, in a worst case situation, the HCP would not result in removal of more than 115 (6 percent of total) seacliff buckwheat plants over a 20-year term, 25 (1 percent of total) in any single year, or 6 (0.3 percent of total) in an average year. We expect this low level of habitat removal to have minor effects on the Smith's blue butterfly.

There is a known occupied California red-legged frog breeding pond within the project site. Fifty-two adult and subadult California red-legged frogs were observed in a 2004 survey there. We expect that few or no California red-legged frogs would be killed due to the proposed construction, as any vegetation will be removed by hand in construction areas and any California red-legged frogs located will be moved out of the construction areas. In addition, construction will be scheduled for the dry season (when California red-legged frogs are less likely to move overland) and/or implemented more than 300 feet from the pond. Visitor use may cause mortality or injury of California red-legged frogs if frogs are stepped on or run over by pedestrians or drivers. We expect interactions between pedestrians and California red-legged frogs to be naturally uncommon, as frogs are most likely to move overland at night during wet weather, while pedestrians are more likely to be out during the day and dry weather. The proposed action includes implementation of a shuttle system on the inn site, which will minimize traffic near the pond to below current levels. New construction will not result in permanent loss of aquatic habitat and will result in the permanent loss of approximately 0.826 acre of upland habitat for the California red-legged frog, which we expect to have negligible effects on the species.

Removal of invasive predators from the pond within the project area may require draining of the pond, recontouring or adding pumps to the pond bottom to ease its drainage, and trapping of crayfish. Pond draining and drainage improvements will cause disturbance of California red-legged frogs, but we expect that few or no California red-legged frogs will be killed, because the pond will be drained in the fall when no eggs and few or no tadpoles will be present, and other life stages will be relocated if they do not

leave the pond on their own. Crayfish trapping may result in incidental trapping of California red-legged frogs, but we expect that few frogs will be caught. Traps will be placed underwater and at least 10 feet from the pond banks, while metamorph, juvenile, and adult frogs are expected to spend most of their time on the banks or at the surface. Trapping will initially occur between October and March, to avoid the season when most California red-legged frog tadpoles are expected to be present. Trapping may be expanded to year-round, but only if a qualified biologist determines that California red-legged frog tadpoles are not being adversely affected. We expect invasive predator control activities to have minor adverse effects on California red-legged frogs and to provide a major benefit to the species by reducing or eliminating unnatural predation.

**B. Are the effects of the HCP minor or negligible on other environmental values or resources (e.g. air quality, geology and soils, water quality and quantity, socio-economic, cultural resources, recreation, visual resources, etc.) prior to implementation of the mitigation plan? (Handbook pg. 1-8 and 1-9)**

Yes, we expect minor or negligible effects on other environmental values and resources. The following more specific discussion is based on information in the draft HCP (Gilchrist et al. 2006) and the County of Monterey's (2002) Mitigated Negative Declaration for the project.

We expect negligible effects on air quality due to the proposed project. The County of Monterey (2002) has required measures to minimize dust due to construction activities, including watering or covering unpaved areas and sweeping soils from paved roads.

We expect negligible effects on geology and soils due to the proposed project. The proposed construction includes measures to minimize erosion, including short term erosion control measures (erosion control blankets, silt curtains, temporary seeding, mulching, etc.) during construction and long-term erosion control measures (slope stabilization with retaining walls, drainage improvements, revegetation with native plantings, etc.) (Gilchrist et al. 2006).

We expect negligible effects on water quality and quantity due to the proposed project. Currently, treated effluent is released to leachfields. The proposed project will improve the existing wastewater treatment system such that wastewater will be treated to a tertiary level and used for landscape irrigation. Thus the increase in groundwater demand for domestic use due to the proposed inn expansion will be offset by a decrease in demand for irrigation (County of Monterey 2002).

a We expect negligible socio-economic effects due to the proposed project. There may be small increase in employment in the Big Sur area due to a 12 percent increase in staff (Gilchrist et al. 2006) at the Post Ranch Inn.

We expect the proposed project to have negligible effects on cultural resources. An archaeological report was prepared for the site, and the project was designed to avoid known cultural resource areas. An archaeological easement was granted to the County of Monterey to protect known cultural resource areas. The County of Monterey (2002) is also requiring that an archaeologist be on site during construction, and that if any significant unknown cultural resource areas are unearthed during construction they be avoided or any impacts to them be mitigated.

We expect the proposed project to have negligible effects on recreation. New recreational facilities will be constructed at the picnic area, but given their small size (2840 square feet) and limited accessibility, significant environmental effects are not expected (County of Monterey 2002).

We expect the proposed project to have negligible effects on visual resources. The proposed buildings would not be visible from California Highway 1. They would be visible from private roads and trails, but because of their distance from those roads and trails (approximately 1 mile), they are not expected to have a significant impact on the viewshed (County of Monterey 2002).

We expect the project to have minor noise effects on the environment. There will be a temporary increase in noise due to the use of heavy equipment during construction. However, because construction will occur over short time periods and only during daylight hours, we expect these effects to be minor (County of Monterey 2002).

**C. Would the impacts of this HCP, considered together with the impacts of other past, present and reasonably foreseeable similarly situated projects not result, over time, in cumulative effects to environmental values or resources which would be considered significant? (Handbook pg. 5-3).**

Yes, we do not expect significant cumulative effects in the Big Sur area. Over half of the land in the Big Sur area is publicly owned and administered primarily by the U.S. Forest Service (County of Monterey 1996). The Monterey County general plan generally requires that new development in the Big Sur area not exceed a density of one single family home per 40-acre lot. A review of all pending Monterey County permits for the Big Sur coastal area ([http://www.co.monterey.ca.us/pbi/projects/planning/carmel\\_dmf\\_bs.htm](http://www.co.monterey.ca.us/pbi/projects/planning/carmel_dmf_bs.htm)) showed that seven pending projects involve repair of existing roads and two projects involve habitat restoration. We do not expect significant environmental effects due to these projects.

Pending development projects in the Big Sur area include construction of six new single family homes, an addition to an existing single family home, construction of a telecommunications antenna site within an existing developed area, two lot line adjustments that do not create new lots, and one minor subdivision splitting a single lot into two. We have limited information on these projects, but given their relatively small

size and their scattered distribution throughout the Big Sur area, we do not expect them to have significant cumulative effects.

**III. Do any of the exceptions to categorical exclusions apply to this HCP? (from 516 DM 2.3, Appendix 2)** *If the answer is "yes" to any of the questions below, the project can not be categorically excluded from NEPA. Each "no" response should include an explanation.*

**Would implementation of the HCP:**

**A. Have significant adverse effects on public health or safety?**

No. The proposed project is located in an area where earthquakes are likely, but the County of Monterey (2002) has required that all proposed structures be built to withstand seismic shaking. No impacts due to hazardous materials are expected (County of Monterey 2002).

**B. Have adverse effects on such unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources, park, recreation or refuge lands, wilderness areas, wild or scenic rivers, sole or principal drinking water aquifers, prime farmlands, wetlands, floodplains, or ecologically significant or critical areas, including those listed on the Department's National Register of Natural Landmarks?**

No. Cultural resources will be avoided as discussed above. No effects are expected on park, recreation, or refuge lands, wilderness areas, or wild and scenic rivers; except that inn expansion may facilitate a minor increase in visitor use of nearby State parks and the Ventana Wilderness Area. The proposed project is not located within an area that includes prime farmlands, sole or principal aquifers, or floodplains. Wetlands within the project site include a pond, a seasonal wetland west of the pond, and isolated seeps. The pond will be improved by the proposed project through removal of invasive species. No other effects on wetlands are expected. Ecologically significant areas within the project site include habitat for the Smith's blue butterfly and California red-legged frog. Effects to these habitats are expected to be minor or negligible before implementation of mitigation measures. There are also five plant community types within the HCP area that are considered rare by the State of California (Gilchrist et al. 2006). Impacts to these communities are limited to removal of 0.13 acre of coast redwood forest, out of a total of 19.92 acres of this community within the HCP area. We expect the impacts of this removal to be negligible.

**C. Have highly controversial environmental effects?**

No. We have not identified any highly controversial effects of the proposed project. Analysis of the project under the California Environmental Quality Act (County of Monterey 2002) did not find any unmitigated significant impacts.

**D. Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks?**

No. The proposed project includes only the expansion and operation of an inn and habitat management. Implementation of the HCP would not have uncertain effects or unknown risks.

**E. Establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects?**

No. This HCP does not establish a precedent for future actions or represent a decision in principle about future actions that will potentially cause significant environmental effects. In addition, we are not aware of any future actions that will be affected by the Post Ranch HCP.

**F. Be directly related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant environmental effects?**

No. We are not aware of any future actions directly related to the Post Ranch HCP; therefore, no significant cumulative effects are expected to occur.

**G. Have adverse effects on properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places?**

No. A search of the National Register of Historic Places (<http://www.nr.nps.gov/nrloc1.htm>) revealed only two sites listed or eligible for listing within the same 7.5 minute quadrangle (Pfeifer Point) as the Post Ranch Inn. These sites are Deetjen's Big Sur Inn (approximately 1 mile southeast of the Post Ranch Inn) and the historic house of Joseph W. Post (less than 0.1 mile east of the Post Ranch Inn). Both of these sites are outside the Post Ranch HCP area, on the opposite side of California Highway 1, and are not expected to be affected by the proposed HCP.

**H. Have adverse effects on listed or proposed species, or have adverse effects on designated Critical Habitat for these species? *Consider the degree or amount of take and the impact of the take on the species. Although take may occur under project implementation, it may be so minor as to result in negligible effects. The same concept applies when considering effects to critical habitat.***

Smith's blue butterflies are known to occur within the project site. Their abundance there is unknown, but the amount of habitat available to them has been estimated as 2000 total seacliff buckwheat plants within the HCP area. Up to 15 seacliff buckwheat plants would be removed due to construction activities. Up to 10 additional seacliff buckwheat plants would be removed due to habitat and fire management activities per year, but with a total limit of 100 seacliff buckwheat plants removed due to these activities over the

proposed 20-year permit term. Therefore, in a worst case situation, the HCP would not result in removal of more than 115 (6 percent of total) seacliff buckwheat plants over a 20 year term, 25 (1 percent of total) in any single year, or 6 (0.3 percent of total) in an average year. We expect this low level of habitat removal to have minor effects on the Smith's blue butterfly. No critical habitat has been designated for this species, therefore none will be affected.

There is a known occupied California red-legged frog breeding pond within the project site. Fifty-two adult and subadult individuals were observed in a 2004 survey there. We expect that few or no California red-legged frogs would be killed due to the proposed construction, as construction will be implemented during the dry season and/or over 300 feet from the on-site breeding pond. Also, in vegetated areas scheduled for construction, vegetation will be removed by hand and any California red-legged frogs located will be moved out of the construction area. New construction will not result in permanent loss of aquatic habitat and will result in the permanent loss of only approximately 0.826 acre of upland habitat for the California red-legged frog, which we expect to have negligible effects on the species. Removal of invasive aquatic animals may result in minor adverse effects on California red-legged frogs, but will be timed and implemented so as to minimize those effects. The proposed project will not be implemented in, near, or upstream of critical habitat for this species (71 Federal Register 19244) therefore none will be affected.

**I. Have adverse effects on wetlands, floodplains or be considered a water development project thus requiring compliance with either Executive Order 11988 (Floodplain Management), Executive Order 11990 (Protection of Wetlands), or the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act?**

No. We do not expect adverse effects on wetlands or floodplains due to the proposed project. Water development is not included in the proposed project.

**J. Threaten to violate a Federal, State, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment?**

No. The proposed project has been approved by the County of Monterey as compliant with local and State environmental laws and requirements (County of Monterey 2002). The proposed project does not take place on tribal land.

#### IV. ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION STATEMENT

Based on the analysis above, the Post Ranch HCP qualifies as a “Low Effect” HCP as defined in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service *Habitat Conservation Planning Handbook*. Therefore, this action is categorically excluded from further NEPA documentation as provided by 516 DM 2, Appendix 1 and 516 DM 6, Appendix 1.

Other supporting documents (list): Habitat Conservation Plan

##### Concurrence:

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(1) Field Supervisor

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Date

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(2) Deputy Manager  
California/Nevada Operations Office

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Date

#### Literature Cited



- Gilchrist, J.A., R.A. Arnold, M. Allaback, and J. Norman. 2006. Low effect habitat conservation plan for the Smith's blue butterfly and California red-legged frog at the Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur, Monterey County, California. Unpublished report to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 99 pp.
- County of Monterey. 2002. Initial study and mitigated negative declaration for the Post Ranch Inn expansion. Unpublished report of the Monterey County Planning and Building Inspection Department. 28 pp. plus appendices.
- County of Monterey. 1996. Big Sur coast land use plan. Unpublished report of the Monterey County Planning and Building Inspection Department. 129 pp.